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INTERACTIVE WAR IN VIETNAM  
PULVERIZING THE CORE VERSUS NIBBLING AT THE EDGES

CORE COURSE ESSAY

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This essay uses Carl von Clausewitz's theories on war to critique US national and military strategy in the Vietnam War. It argues that US policy makers failed to apply two key Clausewitzian concepts. First is the idea that *war is a complex, non-linear interaction between states*. Resulting from this failure, US leaders failed to recognize the true nature of the war -- that is the political context which shaped it, the motives which prompted its enemy to engage in it, and the form it would take. Furthermore, they conducted the war based upon a linear construct which envisioned the carefully "calibrated," controlled and gradually escalated use of power would produce a predictable and desirable response from the enemy.

The second key Clausewitzian concept not applied by US leaders is that although war is non-linear in its nature, *linearity must exist in the proportional relationship between military means (and costs), and the political ends they are designed to attain*. The US mistake in this regard was that it embarked on the war with a disproportionate relationship between its political aim and its military means. In effect, the means it was willing to apply (and the costs it was willing to pay) were insufficient to achieve the desired aim vis a vis the means and ends of its opponent.

The essay is divided into four parts. The first two will examine Clausewitz's concepts of the non-linearity and linearity in war. The second two will use these concepts to critique US strategy in Vietnam.

### **War As Complex, Non-Linear Interaction**

For Clausewitz, war is complex because it involves innumerable factors or variables which interact with one another in a multitude of complicated ways. This complexity makes it difficult to predict its outcome. War would be simpler and more predictable if it involved only physical or

material factors -- troops, equipment, geography, climate, terrain, etc. But in his view, those who consider only the physical factors of war overlook extremely important moral, or human, factors which influence its course. It is the inclusion of these moral factors, such as the political objectives of belligerents, the passions of their populace, and the element of chance on the battlefield which makes war irreducible to a set of geometric principles.

Alan Beyerchen argues that Clausewitz had an intuition for the non-linear, interactive nature of war which we can explain today using concepts of the modern non-linear sciences not available to Clausewitz in his time. Linear systems -- and here war is the 'system' being discussed -- are simple and thus stable, regular and consistent. Non-linear systems, on the other hand, are unstable, irregular and inconsistent. Linear systems must meet two conditions: *proportionality*, meaning that causes and effects are proportional, that small causes produce small effects and vice versa; the second concept, *additivity*, affects how we analyze wars. According to this principle, a whole is equal to the sum of its parts. Therefore, if an analyst can break a problem into its parts and understand them, then he can understand the whole. Non-linear systems disobey one or both of the above concepts. Small causes may cause large effects and synergistic interactions may occur in which the whole is not equal to the sum of its parts.<sup>1</sup>

This concept of non-linearity can be found throughout Clausewitz: his idea of chance, in which a small occurrence on the battlefield can cause huge effects, or the ideas of fog and friction in which the belligerents cannot even discern the "parts" clearly; his denision of analysts who, considering only the physical factors of war and neglecting the moral factors, then conclude they

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<sup>1</sup> Beyerchen, Alan, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Nature of War," *International Security*, Winter 1992-93, pp 61-62

can “measure” the physical factors, thereby reducing war to a set of principles -- or even predicting the outcome of a war on the basis of these quantifiable factors

Clausewitz also viewed war as highly interactive “War, however, is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass (total nonresistance would be no war at all) but always the collision of two living forces”<sup>2</sup> As Beyerchen points out, Clausewitz uses the metaphor of two wrestlers to illustrate this interaction.<sup>3</sup> The positions of the two wrestlers are interdependent, each tries to take advantage of the other’s position and counterweight War is not chess, a series of move-countermove, opponents may not be playing by the same rules and, in fact, in attempting to impose their wills on one another may even change the rules<sup>4</sup> A passage from On War, in which Clausewitz criticizes those who develop theories based solely on material factors, perhaps best encapsulates his view of war as complex, non-linear and interactive “ [they] wanted to reach a set of pure and positive conclusions, and for that reason considered only factors that could be mathematically calculated They aim at fixed values, but in war everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities They direct the inquiry exclusively toward physical quantities, whereas all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects. They consider only unilateral action, whereas war consists of a continuous interaction of opposites”<sup>5</sup>

For Clausewitz, the complexity of war and the interaction of war -- that it will involve one nation’s will pitted against another’s -- make it critical for national leaders to understand what they are engaging in when they make the decision to go to war, for “ wars must vary with

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<sup>2</sup> von Clausewitz, Carl, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1976, p 77

<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz, p 75

<sup>4</sup> Beyerchen, p 67

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, pp 134-136

the nature of their motives and of the situations which give rise to them. The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature”<sup>6</sup> Thus, in Clausewitz’s view, if war is interactive, if it is “policy by other means,” and if it is an act to impose one’s will on the opponent, then the strategist must understand the opponent’s motive for going to war and the price he is willing to pay to achieve his aim.

Although Clausewitz did see war as non-linear, he did believe linearities are present in war.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Linear Aspect of War: Relationship Between Ends and Means**

For Clausewitz, strategy deals with connecting means to ends. The political aim of war is the end -- to impose one’s will on the enemy, force is the means of doing so. Therefore, Clausewitz argues repeatedly in On War that when fashioning strategy, the degree of the political end to be achieved will influence the military means required to achieve it. Large political objectives require a large amount of force and sacrifice. “If war is a part of policy, policy will determine its character. As policy becomes more ambitious and vigorous, so will war.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, “Since war is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude and duration*”<sup>9</sup> These concepts are clearly linear, they meet the linear requirement of proportionality -- large effects (policy aims) require large causes (military means) and large sacrifices (casualties).

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<sup>6</sup> Clausewitz, p. 88

<sup>7</sup> Beyerchen, p. 82

<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, p. 605

<sup>9</sup> Clausewitz, p. 92. *italics are from the original On War*

However, for Clausewitz, because war is not a unilateral action, but rather an interaction, when calculating means and ends we must also consider the enemy's means and ends. "The degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of political demands *on either side* to discover how much of our resources must be mobilized for war, *we must first examine our own political aim and that of the enemy. We must gauge the strength and situation of the opposing state* " <sup>10</sup> Clausewitz felt that calculating the enemy's means was measurable, because it hinged on physical factors "But the strength of his will is much less easy to determine and can only be gauged approximately by the strength of the motive animating it " <sup>11</sup> Additionally, in a passage dealing with people's wars, he notes, "that a nation which finds itself on the brink of an abyss will try to save itself by any means the possibility of avoiding total ruin by paying a high price for peace should not be ruled out." <sup>12</sup>

Although Clausewitz clearly felt the ends-means relationship must be linear, as he so often does in On War he qualifies this conclusion with yet another non-linear concept: the idea that means have a "feedback" effect on political aims which can actually change them "War always lasts long enough for influence to be exerted on the goal and for its own course to be changed the political aim is [not] a tyrant It must adapt itself to its chosen means, a process which can radically change it " <sup>13</sup>

With this understanding of Clausewitz's views of war as complex, non-linear and interactive, but with some linear relationships, these ideas can now be applied to the US strategy in the Vietnam War

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<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz, pp 585-586, italics added for emphasis

<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz, p 77

<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz, p 483

<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz, p 87

## **First Failure of Interactive War: The Nature of the War and the Enemy's Will**

Kennedy and Johnson administration misunderstandings of the complex, non-linear, interactive nature of war resulted in two basic mistakes. The first of these was their failure to understand the true nature of the war.

US leaders' perceptions of North Vietnamese motives were clouded by the Cold War prism through which they viewed them. US leaders believed North Vietnamese support for the insurgency in South Vietnam to be part of the Cold War contest between the Free World and the Communist World. To them the war did not arise from national motives, but from the international motives of a monolithic and expansionist communism which must be contained.<sup>14</sup> They failed to understand, as history has subsequently shown, that nations can be both communist and nationalist. Consequently, they did not carefully analyze *North Vietnamese* motives for fighting the war, but instead attributed the motives to the Soviet Union and China. As a result, they violated Clausewitz's warning about assessing the enemy's will. They underestimated the importance which Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap attached to unifying a divided Vietnam and ridding it of "imperialist" influence. As opposed to being puppets of Moscow or Beijing, North Vietnamese leaders were strongly nationalist. They used the twin themes of nationalism and anti-imperialism to mobilize all the resources of their nation in the fight against the US and its South Vietnamese ally, something the US never did during the course of the war.<sup>15</sup> This miscalculation of North Vietnamese motives was later reflected in the Johnson administration's agonizing search

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<sup>14</sup> Gaddis, John Lewis, Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy, Oxford University Press, New York, 1982, pp. 237-273.

<sup>15</sup> Weigley, Russell in "Reflections on Lessons' from Vietnam," in Vietnam as History, ed. Peter Braestrup, Washington D.C., University Press of America, 1984 explains the nationalism which motivated North Vietnamese leaders. Vo Nguyen Giap in People's War, People's Army, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1962 elaborates on North Vietnamese leaders' anti-imperialist motives.



for an appropriate strategy when Operation Rolling Thunder bombing efforts failed to bring an end to the war <sup>16</sup>

### **Second Failure of Interactive War: Linear Strategy Versus a Non-Linear Opponent**

The second failure which resulted from the US misunderstanding of war as complex, non-linear, and interactive was the strategy of graduated response -- the gradual application of "calibrated, fine-tuned" power to break the North Vietnamese will to continue support for the insurgency in the south, to reduce the flow of materiel from the north to the south, and to get the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. This strategy was most evident in the Rolling Thunder air campaign. The concept was very linear. US leaders hoped the precise application of force would achieve a proportional response from the enemy. Bombing would be followed by a pause to allow the enemy to reflect on what had happened and to understand that if he did not respond by seeking negotiations, then more force would be applied to get the desired result. In other words, the US would apply more cause to get more effect -- the linear concept of proportionality.<sup>1</sup> The US method (particularly from the McNamara Defense Department) of measuring the success of this effort through heavy reliance on statistical indices, such as bomb tonnage dropped and body counts, reflected the linear concept of additivity. It was reducing the war to measurable parts whose sum, in the McNamara approach, could be added to equal the whole -- the success of the war effort.

The problem with the graduated response strategy was that North Vietnam was not a "lifeless mass" but a wrestler. North Vietnamese leaders took advantage of lulls in activity to bolster air defenses. They countered interdiction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail by inserting

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<sup>16</sup> McNamara, Robert S., *In Retrospect*, New York, Random House, 1995, pp. 182-193. McNamara describes the Johnson administration's recognition that Rolling Thunder was not working, that something else needed to be done, and that the enemy was prepared for a long fight.

enough manpower ( a resource they had in abundance and were willing to expend) to keep supplies flowing. Finally, since the aim of the campaign was to get the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table rather than to defeat them, it surrendered the initiative. North Vietnamese leaders could meet for negotiations when they needed a respite and then prolong those negotiations while they resumed the fighting. In retrospect, the US strategy of attempting to break the enemy's will, while at the same time the US was the party most willing to negotiate, seems a contradiction. North Vietnamese leaders could easily see the US wanted peace more than they did, and this reinforced their view they would win in a protracted war.

### **Third Failure of Interactive War: The Means-Ends Mismatch**

The third US strategy failure in Vietnam stems from its inability to achieve proportionality between military means and political objectives in a limited war. Out of concern that China or the Soviet Union might intervene in the conflict ( not an unreasonable concern given the Korean War experience), and the concern to limit the domestic impact of the war, when it made the decision for US forces to actively engage in combat it also decided to place limits on those forces. The number of US forces would be limited, there would be no ground invasion of North Vietnam and airpower would be geographically constrained.

In contrast to these limited military means, the US political objective -- to contain communism and ensure the survival of a weak, unstable South Vietnam was not unlimited. So in Clausewitzian terms, the US established an ambitious objective, but it was unwilling to invest proportionally large military means or to accept large costs in lives. Some critiques of US Vietnam strategy argue that in an attempt to "do something," the US focused too exclusively on its self-constrained means. Larry Cable's analysis is that the US asked the question, "What can

we do?" rather than the more appropriate "What should we do?"<sup>17</sup> John Lewis Gaddis goes so far as to maintain that by not connecting means to ends, the US had no strategy at all <sup>18</sup> Secretary of Defense McNamara himself admits that the department failed to engage in a comprehensive analysis of strategy, but instead focused on the day-to-day problems of fighting the war <sup>19</sup> This short-sightedness was reflected in the US search for a solution from 1965-68 -- the shifting of Rolling Thunder target sets and the series of decisions to increase the number of US forces, within limits, in theater

The US "non-strategy may have worked had it been making war on a 'lifeless mass' " But as Clausewitz wrote, war is interactive When establishing our own ends-means relationship, we must take into account the enemy's political aims and will to succeed As already mentioned, the US failed to do so Consequently, if the US disproportion of means to ends established the conditions for failure, the clash of US means and ends with North Vietnam's means and ends concluded it North Vietnamese leaders were willing to expend all the means at their disposal in order to achieve their unlimited goal -- reunification of Vietnam and expulsion of an outside power Having previously defeated an outside power, France, North Vietnam was analogous to Clausewitz's "nation in an abyss," willing to pay a high price (by some estimates 900,000 casualties<sup>20</sup>) for victory The US, in contrast, was not willing to make the same level of sacrifice, as Clausewitz termed it, "in magnitude and duration "

One further observation is worthy of mention in the ends-means relationship in the US approach to the Vietnam War As Clausewitz correctly surmised, the character of a war does

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<sup>17</sup> Cable, Larry, Lecture to the National War College, 12 September 1996

<sup>18</sup> Gaddis, pp 273

<sup>19</sup> McNamara, p 182

<sup>20</sup> Pike, Douglas "The Other Side," in Vietnam as History, ed Peter Braestrup, Washington D C , University Press of America, 1984, p 73

influence its political aims. In Vietnam, as the war dragged on with US success ever elusive, US leaders gradually shifted their objective from resisting communist aggression and ensuring the survival of South Vietnam, to ensuring the credibility of US commitments, to Vietnamization -- allowing the South Vietnamese to defend themselves with the aid of US material resources.

In his chapter on people's war Clausewitz made the assertion that, "Militia should not be employed against the main enemy force they are not supposed to pulverize the core but to nibble at the shell and around the edges."<sup>21</sup> In the Vietnam War, the US attempted to pulverize the core using a linear strategy, North Vietnam nibbled at the edges using a non-linear strategy. North Vietnamese statesmen and commanders understood the complex, non-linear nature of war, US leaders did not.

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<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz, p. 480

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